

Conference Paper

Soviet Constructivism as Social-reforming Way for a Life Reconstructing By Architectural Methods: The Reasons for the Forbidding

Mark Meerovich¹ and Konstantin Lidin²

¹Irkutsk National Research Technical University

²Irkutsk State Railway University

Abstract

The aim of the study was to provide answers to a historical question that still remains a blank spot in Russian historiography - what are the reasons for the banning of the Soviet architectural avant-garde in 1932. The article gives an answer to the question of the reasons why the supreme bodies of Soviet power ceased the development of Soviet constructivism. Reveals the socio-political motives of this decision. Describes the features of the functioning of the totalitarian-command system of management of the nation-wide project complex. It shows that the prohibition of constructivism was a direct consequence of the transformation of the free profession of an architect into a public service. Characterizes the position of the party and state leadership of the USSR in relation to the Soviet architectural avant-garde in general. The result of the study is to prove the fact that, after its official prohibition, constructivism has not disappeared, but has changed. It turned into the so-called "Soviet functionalism", which was a response to the need for the management metric criteria for evaluating design decisions. Soviet functionalism took from Soviet constructivism only what ensured the exercise of administrative functions of leadership and control. He took only what was the "materialization" of meanings, only that which could be felt and measured. At the same time, reasoning about the form, rhythm, plasticity and other "aesthetic nonsenses" were discarded as unnecessary.

Keywords: Soviet architectural avant-garde, constructivism, Stalin's empire, architect profession in the USSR

Corresponding Author:

Mark Meerovich

memark@inbox.ru

Konstantin Lidin

lidinkl@hotmail.com

Received: 26 April 2018

Accepted: 25 May 2018

Published: 7 June 2018

Publishing services provided by
Knowledge E

© Mark Meerovich and

Konstantin Lidin. This article is
distributed under the terms of

the [Creative Commons](#)

[Attribution License](#), which

permits unrestricted use and

redistribution provided that the

original author and source are

credited.

Selection and Peer-review

under the responsibility of the

ISPS Convention 2017

Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

In 1932, constructivism was officially banned in the USSR, like all other independent creative groups of the Soviet architectural avant-garde. However, this prohibition looked very paradoxical. The project approach under the slogans of "mastering the

OPEN ACCESS

classical heritage" has successfully taken root in relation to the external form (even giving rise to the specific name "Stalin's Empire"). At the same time, the method of functional design of planning structures laid down by the constructivists was completely preserved. Why did the theoretical ideas of constructivists prove to be a substantive and procedural basis for mass design practice in the USSR, despite the prohibition of constructivism, despite the fact that as leaders, as rank-and-file members were forced to repent publicly of adherence to their projecting method and to abandon it?

Soviet historiography gaped in vain in answering these and similar questions, because researchers: art historians and architects, are almost completely immersed in the study of external stylistic features and design features of constructivist buildings. But practically no one tries to answer questions about the causes of historical phenomena, revealing the role of the Soviet socio-political, totalitarian-command system in the processes of regulating the party-state power of architectural creativity in the USSR.

2. Methods

After 1928 in the Soviet Union, town-planning and architectural decisions were made regardless of the opinion of architects. These decisions were the result of Soviet programs: the movement of labor resources, the construction of power stations and transport communications, the resettlement of labor to near the new industrial objects, etc. In particular, the decision to ban constructivism was inseparably linked with the beginning of the implementation of the industrialization plan. To understand the causes of these decisions and their relationship to the processes that took place within the architectural profession in the USSR, one have to only consider historical phenomena through the prism of the Soviet system of government, industrial policy, Marxist-Leninist ideology, of the state and legislative regulation of the projecting process, and so on.

Only such a systemic representation is capable of reconstructing the architectural and town-planning tasks that the government has been solving during the period under investigation, and to reveal the reasons that led to the decision to dissolve creative architectural groups. Only an analysis of architectural phenomena through the prism of official architectural and town-planning policies allows one to answer the question of the motives for sharp changes in the course of Soviet architecture. Only

through an understanding of the tasks of party and state power in the USSR can we understand those actions and also the ways of implementing them - the actions that the country's leadership purposefully and methodically applied to the profession of the architect with the aim of transforming it in the useful direction.

To identify the nature of the forced evolution of architectural and town-planning creativity and to understand why architectural and town-planning theorizing evoked in one moment that approval, and in another, on the contrary, sharp rejection by party structures, the work used a contextual method of investigation. It allows us to disclose the influence of the socio-political context of the period under study on the architectural and town-planning phenomena and the organizational and managerial realities of the existence of the architect's profession in the USSR.

3. Results

Soviet constructivism, despite its prohibition in 1932, continued to exist. After 1932, the method of constructivism was transformed into the so-called "Soviet functionalism" and practiced in parallel with the style of "Stalin's Empire." Only the method of constructivists was used exclusively in the development of the spatial-functional content of the buildings and complexes. The "using of the classic heritage" within the style of the Stalin Empire, it was directed only at the formation of the structure and plastics of the facades.

The method of constructivists exists and still – in those its part, which is related to the optimization of the functional content of the design object.

4. Discussion

4.1. The method of constructivists - social reformism

At the heart of the constructivists' design method was the call for a radical transformation of the way of life of the country's population, for a radical change in the functional content of the habitat, for purposeful management of people's every day and productive behavior (social engineering). According to this "social reform" idea, every architectural structure was interpreted as a means of artificial organization of the processes of life and activity of people [2]. In the method of constructivists, the object of designing was, in fact, vital (household) or productive activity. And the architectural form of the structure served only as a means of materializing this activity.

Thus, the revolutionary content of the constructivists' method approach was that the architectural design with its plasticity, symbolism, tectonics and imagery became the object and subject of architectural reflection and design, and the production-household activity itself (Ilchenko 2016; [8], 69-73).

At the same time, constructivists called the main goal of architectural activity not the making of a project embodying a naturally formed set of processes. But, first of all, work with the processes themselves - determination of the optimal set, clarifying the patterns of their spatial realization, determining the required nature of their connection to the whole and, ultimately, changing their composition and transforming their content in order to improve them and create a new style of life and movement.

Thus, the conceptual views of the constructivists radically changed the goal of architectural creativity - it was directed, first of all, in "creating the optimal organization of socio-cultural processes." And the building, its walls and partitions, was a secondary factor, the consequence of this organized processes, only "sketching" of this optimal organization (graphically depicted as a "functional structure"). Plus the arrangement (within the "functional zones") of the relevant equipment.

The main question is theoretical and methodological, which the constructivists have set themselves: how is the "vital activity" and "productive activity", has becoming the object of design, fixed and depicted?

Constructivists solved this question. And, in a very peculiar way - for the first time in the history of architecture they began to represent life activity as sets of household and production processes, as "functions", connected together according to certain rules. Homogeneous "processes" graphically began to be depicted as "zones", where the same actions are performed, represented by the "arrangement of equipment" and as "links" between the zones, indicating the movement of people and goods (traffic graphs) ([2], 7). The totality of zones and connections was a "functional structure" ([2], 5). Using this technique, constructivists replaced the continuous fluidity of "living" processes by their conditional, static image. Thus, they formed an opportunity to work graphically with processes - to simulate them on paper: to integrate, transform, optimize, etc. In the creative method of constructivists, the "organization of the processes of life and activity" (organization of the functional structure) has become the main content of design, because the thoroughness of its elaboration ensured an economically advantageous "picture" of the process - it ensured the "saving of manpower" in the future exploitation ([2], 6-7).

The leader of constructivism M. J. Ginzburg believed that this method is equally applicable as in the design of residential and industrial buildings, and in the design of cities ([2], 9).

This method fully corresponded to the tasks and ideology of the Soviet government, which, as a specific constituent unit of the new society, maintained the so-called "Working collective" - the unification of people at work (the collective of the shop, the brigade, the staff of a Soviet office), who moved into one "brigade" dwelling and began to coexist communally [1].

The method of constructivists allowed to design such a settlement in the most rational, economical way.

4.2. Reasons for the prohibition of constructivism in the USSR

Why, despite the effectiveness of the constructivism design method, it, like other creative groups of the Soviet architectural avant-garde, was banned? Why, with the complete coincidence of its substantive program with the state ideology of the spatial arrangement of work collectives, was it rejected by the party-state apparatus? Why instead of him, in the profession of the architect "from above" was decreed the "tracing-paper" of the artistic style, later called "Stalin's Empire", which all the Soviet architects should now unquestioningly follow?

Until now, the causes of this historical phenomenon remain unexplored.

Beginning in the mid-1920s, the Soviet leadership purposefully formed a departmental hierarchical apparatus for guiding industrialization. From the late 1920s onwards, since the beginning of the first five-year plan, it is facing an urgent need to promptly establish a strict executive order. Government needs an architect obliged to carry out mass, flow-conveyor designing of new industrial enterprises and settle them, on a nationwide scale, providing architectural and planning projects for the programs of People's Commissariats [7].

The Soviet leadership sets the task of creating a nationwide system of project management, designed to provide the project documentation with a huge amount of construction work related to the construction of a huge number of new military-industrial production facilities, as well as the facilities of the extractive and processing industries that serve them. Under industrial, power, transport new buildings settlements are being built to accommodate workers and their families. Settlements of a very specific type and socio-organizational content – the so-called. "Socialist cities".

The presence of various professional views and ideas about the future of architecture and town planning in Soviet society, professional and ideological views, methodologies for project activities, etc., formed during several previous years within the framework of creative architectural communities [5, 9, 10, 12, 13], hinders the desire of the authorities to turn the pre-revolutionary profession of "architect-creator", "architect-artist" into a mechanism Implementation of a unified state policy. The variative content of professional thinking and activity does not meet the idea of a uniform structure of the state and departmental system of project management, which is considered primarily as a means of providing project documents for the state industrial, transport, energy construction programs.

Organizers and members of creative groups were convinced of the correctness of their professional views, the peculiarities of their project approach, the goals of their creativity. They were wayward and independent. They could not be forced to do anything contrary to their professional views. Especially when they were sure that their ideas give a more correct result. They propagandized their own ideas, conceptual, theoretical, methodological principles. They were negate to impose on the typology of a communal dwelling for a room-family settlement, for the accommodation of work-communal communes, the content of the concept of "socialist cities," or the nature of the system of "socialist settlement" ". They were determining themselves what to do and what to reflect on.

In addition, from a legal point of view, creative associations (ASNOVA, AGC, OCA and even VOPRA) were private organizations, because they were established by specific individuals and formally did not submit to a government control. The content of the functioning of a "private-personified" public association was largely determined by the leader of the creative group. State structures, in particular the Moscow Executive Committee of the Council of Workers, Red Army and Peasant Deputies, sharply criticized the architectural groups for this: "Our architectural societies MAO. AGC, ASNOVA, OSA, VOPRA <...> are actually just contract organizations for servicing their members with contracts" ([1], 1), "dozens of them scattered around major cities and construction centers, in essence, are organizations of architects of a private order with one or another ideological bias in matters of architecture" ([2], 23).

The existence of such creative professional associations (not only in architecture, but also in other forms of creativity - music, literature, and visual arts) was absolutely incompatible with the laws of the functioning of large state systems of activity in the

conditions of totalitarianism. They did not fit into the vertical of centralized management.

Party leadership of the country, in the implementation of the nation-wide architectural and town-planning policy, did not have the opportunity to rely on private creative groups of the Soviet architectural avant-garde, because they did not comply with the regulations of the civil service in which the authorities sought to turn the architecture. The authorities did not need "creators" who independently make decisions; it needed obedient executors of decisions, descending from above - from the upper floors of the party-state vertical of power. Executors, capable of forcing their own subordinates to embody in architectural projects, these decisions. Constructivists, like other groups of the Soviet architectural avant-garde, prevented the transformation of architectural creativity into a stream-conveyor production of standardized and typed project documentation.

The Soviet authorities did not need people devoted to their worldview, their creative method, their architectural and town-planning ideas. The authorities needed people loyal to an officially "sane" worldview, officially approved by the creative method, officially proclaimed architectural and town-planning ideas. The authorities need to popularize their ideological attitudes among the architect community. The authorities need a universal mechanism for communicating their orders to a mass ordinary performer - a project designer. The authorities needed an obedient and diligent contingent of those who were able to realize government conceptual and regulatory prescriptions,

Undoubtedly, despite their disobedience to state structures, the passivity with regard to the appeals of the authorities to perform certain tasks, both leaders and members of creative architectural associations aspired to be included in the nationwide project system. The desire to get a status of federal importance to their work in order to use public resources (financial, propaganda, ideological, organizational, etc.) to realize their ideas was fully motivated. In the conditions of a totalitarian state it would give unlimited opportunities for the implementation of scientific and practical activities. Attraction of the state resource would make it possible to save huge expenses of personal time and forces for finding funds for publishing books and magazines, organizing exhibitions and competitions for the purpose of agitation and propaganda, and defending their position at conferences and congresses. Leaders of creative groups sincerely sought to include their groupings in state structures and to use the resource of these structures for their meaningful purposes.

Both leaders and rank-and-file members of creative groups tended to unite in one organization. But at the same time, so as not to lose its independence and maintain its individuality. This power could not be tolerated - constructivism and the Soviet architectural avant-garde, as a whole, did not fit into the system of mass project activity that it created, as well as the Union of Soviet Socialist Architects, formed for the control of any creative movements. The state of Stalin's type did not leave any loopholes for "independent creativity", it extended to the farthest corners of the architectural profession, because the profession of an architect in the USSR was reformed from "private" to "state". That is why constructivism was eliminated.

The authorities was resigning themselves to the existence of constructivism and other creative groups in architecture, only as long as the state system did not mature and did not form an understanding of how a unified national system of project management should be organized. After that, everything that did not fit into the "command-and-order" system, everything that turned out to be incompatible with the functioning of the "man-machine" of the architectural and design business was eliminated. Only what was consistent with the idea of a federalwide system for organizing the architectural profession was left.

System of mass design began to growth rapidly with its start. One of the basic requirements for knowledge, intended for use within the system, was the ability to express them in specific numerical values. In addition, they must be rationally justified. As a consequence, the simplest, most obvious, thing that could be expressed in metric parameters was chosen for official distribution from the existing architectural representations at that time. It was selected only that did not require special qualification from a mass new-trained specialists, replenishing the scope of project activities.

4.3. The method of constructivism after its prohibition is "Soviet functionalism"

Why did the theoretical method of constructivists, after its prohibition, become the content and procedural basis of mass design practice in the USSR? How did it happen that the method of functional design of planning structures laid by the constructivists could get along with the project approach of "using the classical heritage"?

A specific feature of using the method of constructivists in mass design practice during the heyday of the "Stalin Empire style" was that, on the one hand, the method was used as the basis for the official methodology for designing buildings and structures.

And on the other hand, at the same time, it is separated from the process of form-building, which was carried out independently of the functional-planning study of the construction plan. Thus, the students of the Moscow Architectural Institute of the early 1930s. Recalled how they were taught to design an "architectural shell, form" apart from "functional content," i.e. The facade is separate from the layout: "our teachers led us along some unique path. They suggested not... to distract themselves from the main, as they said, themes, from the composition of the facade. They offered to simply choose any section you like from magazines, put them together in one strip and pay all attention to the facade. And, as far as I understood then, we had to carefully study only the main facade facing the street or square.... In practice, we had to make a beautiful facade, providing it with various architectural fragments or details, such as architectural cornices, intertwining rods, sandricks or platbands, balconies with balusters or without. As a result, everyone got something. As the Renaissance, as Spain, as the Empire..." ([6], 71).

The practice of designing the facades separately from the layout, distinguished the "methodology" of Stalin's Empire style from the method of constructivists, which included a broad program of complex study of the figurative and compositional aspects of the design object; Program for studying the patterns of formation. Original method was much more complicated than the result of reduction to a number of functional postulates into which it was turned in the Soviet practice of mass design. What remained of the method of constructivists, after the "purging" it of "formalism", it would be more correct to call as "Soviet functionalism." It can be argued that Soviet functionalism, which arose in the early 1930s, was the product of the administrative apparatus of the state system of mass project design - it took from Soviet constructivism only that which provided for the administrative functions of leadership and control. He took only what metric criteria met, what was the "materialization" of meanings, which could be felt and measured, while thinking about form, rhythm, plasticity and other "esthetic nonsenses" was dismissed as unnecessary.

Soviet functionalism has turned into a massive project method not immediately. And it happened, of course, not because some official of architecture or statesman sitting in his office, purposefully selected certain theoretical ideas for their mass use. The Soviet system of professional knowledge of mass use was not created at all as a result of someone's personal creation. It was formed in a natural way, by itself, under the influence of many social, political, cultural, organizational and other conditions and factors. First of all, the very task, posed by time and situation, - task of creating a single

normative and methodological base for a federal wide project complex has "filtered out" the not suitable theoretical systems.

In the design practice of "Soviet functionalism" design was based on operating only with those functional processes that already existed at the morphological level, because the possibilities of this tool were very limited - they did not allow to move from the image of reality to reality per se. A phenomena of real life there could be designated by a conditional connection on the diagram, but in reality they existed much more complicated and not at all according to the laws of the graphic image.

Schemes of "functional zoning" made it possible to graphically record vital processes, presenting them in the form of a set of "functional zones" i.e. Sections of the territory where one-type actions and sums of trajectories of the movement of masses of people and cargo are realized, schematically depicted as "links" between functional zones. But, in fact, the designers, not knowing the ways of representing and describing the processes as such, judged them only indirectly - through their naturally existing organization, embodied in the material. That is, the architect operated only with constructive, material, spatial factors and so on. Morphology, but not the processes themselves. Because the functional zoning schemes did not directly overlap with the empirical material. They were only theoretical abstractions. "Functional connection" cannot be directly seen, just as one cannot hit the "post of atmospheric pressure" or stumble over the "meridian". But with the help of this, rather conditional, the means can be "seen" in any reality (of course, by modernizing it), the corresponding "functional processes", "functional structures", "functional zones".

Schemes of functional zoning turned out to be quite efficiently applicable in both rationing and criticism. They were also used in applied research - in case of inefficiency in the operation of the building, it was possible to impose a functional diagram on the construction plans and to identify a mismatch with the morphological features of the project. This allowed to identify the causes of inefficient operation and to adjust the design decision.

5. Conclusion

Constructivism (as well as Soviet functionalism) failed to create a methodological design tool that would allow to operate with the actual processes of life. That is, taken alone, outside their morphological appearance. And without this, an adequate study of life activity, its theoretical modeling, the construction of its new organization and

subsequent design of its material shell became possible only in a narrow spectrum, in fact, of material processes.

The theoretical models used by the designers could reveal the relationship between the procedural structure and its spatial morphology in only one very narrow aspect: when the processes were embodied in the operation of people with things and equipment, and also in specific trajectories, the movement of goods and people.

At the same time, the motion charts and functional zoning schemes were helpless in describing the "intangible" aspects of life that pertained to spiritual development, reproduction and transmission of culture, upbringing, intellectual development, and so on. That is, that were not inextricably linked with specific things and equipment. Professional-ideological postulate on the role of architecture as providing material-spatial realization of life processes, in practice was embodied only in a narrow range of utilitarian procedures. The ideology of the Soviet functional approach rigorously covered this "gap" in architectural (and town-planning) theory, stubbornly repeating ideological spells about: "the architect organizes in his project the totality of social and cultural processes." But the very theory and methodology of this postulate did not provide. Materialistic ideology, unambiguously exposing the material aspects of life to the first place in the hierarchy of values, looked favorably at such unfoundedness of theoretical architectural postulates. The "non-materializable" aspects of architecture were recognized as important only in words. In fact, only utilitarian procedures were the object of design, and about "non-materialized" processes it was sentenced that they were "very, very important" and... also realized. But in practice it has always been more important to commission a new shop, or a giant factory, than to reflect on how to spatially morphologize the processes of cultural development or spiritual perfection of the workers of this plant. Production led to being. Material dominated over the idealism of the non-material. And the theoretical models of the design object again and again formed the mentality of the "functional" type in the next generation of professionals.

References

- [1] Antoshchenko, A.V. and M. G. Meyerovich. 2007. "Trudo-bytovyye kollektivy – sotsial'no-organizatsionnaya osnova doktriny sotsgoroda" [Work Collectives – the Social and Organizational Basis of Socialist City Doctrine]. In *Miasta nowych ludzi. Architektoniczna i urbanistyczna spuścizna komunizmu*. Warszawa: Studium Europy Wschodniej. 1: 101-112.

- [2] Ginzburg, M.Ya. 1927. "Tselevaya ustanovka v sovremennoy arkhitekture" [Goal-setting in Modern Architecture]. *Sovremennaya arkhitektura*, 1: 4-10.
- [3] Ilchenko, M. 2017. "Unfinished project as a way to conceive soviet urban planning in the 1920s and the 1930s: the case of socialist cities". *Siberian Historical Research*, 2:56-79. DOI: 10.17223/2312461X/16/5
- [4] Lidin, K.L. and M. G. Meyerovich. 2016. "Desyat' zadach konstruktivista Moiseya Ginzburga" [Constructivist Moses Ginzburg's Ten Tasks]. *Tatlin News* 2 (89): 586-598.
- [5] Lisitsina, Ya.Yu. 2013. "Tvorcheskiiy metod arkhitekтора-khudozhnika Ya.G. Chernikhova kak fenomen otechestvennoy kul'tury 20 veka" [Creative Method of Architect-artist Ya.G. Chernikhov as a 20th century Russian Cultural Phenomenon]. PhD. Diss. Irkutsk: East Siberian State Academy of Culture and Arts.
- [6] Markus, B. 2006. "Do voyny" [Before the War]. *MARKHI XX vek*. Vol. 2.
- [7] Meyerovich, M.G. 2010. "Strategiya tsentralizatsii i zapret sovetskogo arkhitekturnogo avangarda" [Centralization Strategy and Proscription of the Soviet Architectural Avant-garde]. *Arkhitectura stalinskoy epokhi: opyt istoricheskogo osmysleniya*, edited by Yu.L. Kosenkova, 31-39. Moscow: KomKniga.
- [8] Meyerovich, M.G. 2015. "Naslediye konstruktivizma – sovetskaya funktsional'naya arkhitekturnaya tipologiya" [The Legacy of Constructivism is the Soviet Functional Architectural Typology]. In *Novaya zhizn' pamyatnikov konstruktivizma: materialy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii*, edited by T.Yu. Taychenacheva and N.A. Alekseyeva, 69-73. Novosibirsk: Non-commercial fund for the development of Eurasian culture common space EA-City.
- [9] Meyerovich, M.G. 2016a. "Izvestnyye, no neizuchennyye imena sovetskogo konstruktivizma" [Famous, but Unexplored Names of Soviet Constructivism]. *Tatlin News*, 2 (89): 599-614.
- [10] Meyerovich, M.G. 2016b. "Pochemu v Sovetskom Soyuze byl zapreshchen arkhitekturnyy avangard" [Why the Architectural Avant-garde was Forbidden in the Soviet Union]. *Tatlin News*, 2 (89): 563-579.
- [11] Meyerovich, M.G. 2016c. "Yakov Chernikhov. Konstruktivizm naoborot – ot formy k funktsii" [Yakov Chernikhov. Constructivism on the Contrary – From Form to Function]. *Tatlin News*, 2 (89): 615-619.
- [12] Meyerovich M.G. and Ya. Yu. Lisitsina. 2012. "Lineynyye bespredmetnyye elementy v arkhitekturnom formoobrazovanii Yakova Chernikhova" [Linear Non-objective Elements in Yakov Chernikhov Architectural Shaping]. *Arkhitectura i stroitel'stvo Rossii*, 10: 12-19.

- [13] Meyerovich M.G. and Ya. Yu. Lisitsina. 2013. "Konstruktivizm Ya.G. Chernikhova – metod kombinatoriki bespredmetnykh elementov" [Constructivism Ya.G. Chernikhova – Combinatoric Method of Non-objective Elements]. *Alma mater*, 8: 104-107.
- [14] *Stroitel'stvo Moskvy*. 1930. [Construction of Moscow]. № 5.
- [15] *Stroitel'stvo Moskvy*. 1930. [Construction of Moscow]. № 7.